

The Teacher Talent Trove

by Terrence Quinn

Capitalizing on the rich talents of teachers promotes better education for students and a stronger sense of professionalism for teachers.

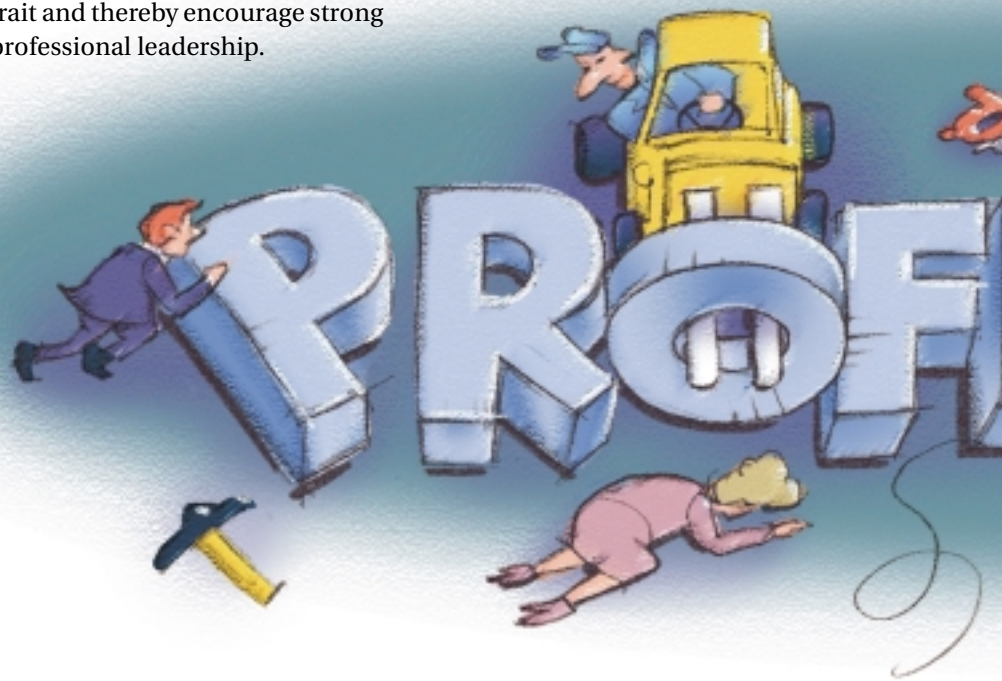
Let's face it. The journey toward professionalism for teachers will never be declared a success until the educational policy makers succeed in harnessing the power and energy of one critical force—the nation's 3.5 million public and private school teachers. When the last government report has been issued, the last professional conference has been convened, and the establishment has had its say, it will all come back to the teachers to make it work.

When our nation's educators close the doors of their classrooms, it is their efforts that will determine whether teaching remains a semi-profession or achieves the full professional status accorded to doctors, architects, and accountants. In his study of America's schools, John Goodlad (1984, 109) commented that "teachers controlled rather firmly the central role of deciding what, where, when, and how their students were to learn." That observation still holds true.

To be frank, several barriers conspire in many schools—lack of

time for planning, the lonely and isolated culture of the classroom, and the traditional, hierarchical decision-making approaches—to mar the complete portrait of teachers as leaders. This article considers strategies to rebuild that portrait and thereby encourage strong professional leadership.

dent progress, busy conferring with colleagues and students, and busy coordinating schedules. During their duty-free lunch periods, they are busy preparing afternoon les-



The Hectic Pace of School

Several conditions within schools impinge on the creation of professional communities. To cite one obvious example, the busy pace of schools poses a serious obstacle to professionalism. In the course of a typical seven-hour instructional school day, teachers are constantly busy—busy preparing, busy teaching, busy assessing stu-

sons and following up on morning matters.

Is there a solution to the frenetic and fragmented pace that afflicts teachers? In one case, the principal and teachers at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, devised a plan that created common planning time for faculty teams. The teachers agreed to arrive 15 min-

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utes early one day each week. By delaying the start of the school day for some 30 minutes and reducing each class by 5 minutes, faculty members gained 45 minutes for collaborative planning. According to the principal, the plan does not cost money, students arrive at the same time every day, and parents are not inconvenienced. Stevenson students spend the faculty planning time in the computer lab, tutoring rooms, study halls, gym, counselor's office, or with social

uling leads to more careful agenda planning and greater dialogue on the important issues related to genuine student progress:

- How can we use recent student achievement data to plan more effectively?
- How do the new curriculum offerings align with standardized test requirements?
- What strategies are worthwhile to promote improved teacher-student interaction in the classroom?

A Culture of Loneliness

The isolated nature of teaching is another concern that threatens teacher professionalism. Much has been written about the isolation and loneliness that describes the daily life of teachers (Darling-Hammond 1997). For many, the bulk of their day is spent in the presence of children and is devoid of significant adult contact.

Are there any strategies to combat the isolation of the classroom? When educators realize that they possess enormous power, responsibility, and authority to act through planning teams and site-based management councils, teacher professionalism is en-



workers. Faculty members with flexible programs supervise students. Stevenson School District Superintendent Rick DuFour (in Mann 2000, 3) suggested that given 45 minutes of additional planning time, "any school faculty could determine at least a half-dozen scheduling scenarios that would allow for more collaboration without violating collective bargaining agreements." Such creative sched-

These are all questions that yearn for meaningful teacher participation.

Teachers need time to collaborate on issues they deem relevant to the success of their students and their own job satisfaction. Collaborative planning based on teacher-student needs adds to the positive culture for which schools strive and provides hope for attaining the elusive goal of teacher professionalism.

hanced. A national survey (Singh and Billingsley 1998) examined the effects of professional support on teachers' commitment to their craft. Among the findings: There is greater opportunity for success and satisfaction when teachers feel supported by other teachers in instructional and disciplinary matters. In addition, the survey found that when teachers share common values, assist each other with professional growth,

and solve problems together, they are more likely to receive a sense of fulfillment from their work and reap psychological rewards.

Colleague support also has been, for many years, consistently associated with teacher retention (Bloland and Selby 1980; Theobald 1989). A study by Singh and Shifflette (1996) reported that teachers acknowledged emotional and instruc-

reflective practice groups, communities of learners, and the like."

A New Model of Teacher Leadership

The work of schools is too complex and too burdensome for leadership to flow from one source, traditionally the principal's office. Today's school leaders do not always possess the expertise to take charge of the myriad responsibilities that have overtaken schools. What is needed for today's schools is a more enlightened approach to leadership that discourages a top-down, one person, principal-centered strategy based on power and control and that favors a more team-centered model. The needed model emphasizes community, collaboration, and cooperation—in other words, a redistribution of leadership tasks. This new approach moves the focal point of decision-making from *me* to a more collaborative *we*. The urgency of a new approach to leadership was underscored by Richard Elmore (1999, 27), who noted, "In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform these complex tasks without distributing responsibility for leadership among roles in the organization."

What can teachers do to jumpstart this leadership model in schools? They can use their individual talents and support systems to design, conduct, and participate in professional development; volunteer to participate in the recruitment, selection, and induction of new teachers; and recommend new professional-development practices for faculty colleagues.

If distributed leadership is to have impact, the focus must be on the core mission of schools—that is, to improve the teaching-learning

process. One survey, conducted over a 10-year period, was designed to study ways to improve science learning and teaching. The report (Riordan 2003, 25–26) concluded:

Distributed leadership—both in schools and in districts—works. It produces good results as measured by the quality of the professional development and the curriculum and assessment tools produced, the successful recruitment of teachers into intensive professional development, and the emergence of teacher-led professional communities within and across the schools.

If distributed leadership is to be an institutional force in schools, teacher expertise is a logical resource to tap. The sharing of teacher talent generates strong professional communities. Schools that encourage strong learning communities of teachers also produce powerful achievement. In a study of elementary, middle, and high schools, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) linked student gains in math, science, and reading with the growth of strong teacher commitment to ongoing professional development. In these kinds of communities, teachers do not work in isolation. These communities foster collegial working relationships, use dialogue with teachers to inform and enhance the craft of teaching, and rely on a shared commitment to one another and to students.

A common thread that permeates achieving schools is the presence of strong teacher leadership that works with school administrators to distribute tasks and assignments within and throughout school organizations. In these settings, wise school

Collaborative planning provides hope for attaining the elusive goal of teacher professionalism.

tional support from peers as the most important factors in their professional development. It is clear that to ward off the threat of isolation, teachers need regular opportunities to discuss their work or simply to engage in mature conversations about issues related to teaching.

Another strategy that responds to the culture of isolation in schools is the growing recognition of the value of work in teams and small groups. The work of such teams expresses itself through activities that include mentoring junior colleagues, peer coaching, and site-based management. When teacher teams collaborate to develop curriculum assessments, solve classroom instructional problems, and explore new pedagogical techniques, the result is an improvement in shared knowledge that produces a stronger sense of professional community. Gordon Donaldson (2001, 79) reported, "American schools are experimenting with interdisciplinary teams,

leaders work with teachers to explain the importance of data in decision-making, shape important learning goals, establish a positive culture, and realign resources to support learning goals.

Empowerment

There is much that teachers can do to promote their own sense of professionalism. To be truly effective, teachers must become lifelong learners of the new pedagogy and embrace technology. They must build partnerships with colleagues, parents, business, and the larger community. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) identified guidelines that would coincide with a new definition of professionalism. They included a need to practice reflection, develop a risk-taking personality, trust process as well as people, commit to working with colleagues, seek variety, avoid balkanization, balance work and life, redefine one's role to extend beyond the classroom, and engage in continuous improvement.

Teachers also must believe that education is a profession as noble as any other. Imagine the impact that teachers could have on students, parents, and the community if they hung their college degrees and awards on the walls of their classrooms to demonstrate their professional competence! Still more powerful would be a group of teachers who distributed their business cards. Sounds startling, but the whole notion of teachers as leaders is equally startling considering the penchant for tradition and orthodoxy in schools. Boards of education and teacher leaders should recognize professional milestones in the lives of their colleagues—for example, the awarding of advanced degrees, addi-

tional certifications, special seminars they led or attended, conducting and sharing research at faculty meetings, publishing an article, or obtaining a grant. Such public recognition for the profession would ripple throughout the entire community and beyond.

In an era of participatory governance that weaves through the mission statements of many organizations, teachers have every right and the expertise to contribute their talents. According to Roland Barth (2001), himself a former teacher and principal and a strong advocate of teacher empowerment, there are at least 10 areas of governance that lend to teacher leadership:

- choosing textbooks;
- designing curriculum;
- setting standards for student behavior;
- setting school-promotion and student-retention policies;
- deciding school budgets;
- selecting new teachers;
- selecting new administrators;
- evaluating teacher performance;
- determining staff development needs; and
- deciding special class placements for students.

So what does the portrait of a teacher leader look like? Generally, the composite teacher leader is one who likes and works well with people, is dependable and honest, is a lifelong learner, demonstrates a strong faith in the school and in colleagues, and is a good listener. The teacher leader also demonstrates administrative potential and possesses important technical skills required for program improvement. Professional development for teacher leaders focuses on improving one's content skills

in curriculum and standards-based instruction, and learning the skills of reflective practice, consensus, action research, and problem solving.

In conclusion, teacher leadership represents a powerful approach to assert the true professionalism that educators have long been seeking. As this article suggests, opportunities abound for teachers to contribute to school reform by demonstrating their leadership skills. Barth (2001, 78) reminded us, "reformers are those who know something about the organization, have a vision leading to a better way, can enlist others in that vision, and can mine the gold of everyone's craft knowledge to discover ways to move toward that vision." Who better than teachers to pursue the call for reform?

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